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9/15*

September 16, 1969

Dear Bob:

I was sorry to learn upon my return from California that you had been in Washington during the weekend of August 15, while I was away. I regret having missed this opportunity to see you.

I have just received your letter of September 10, and as always appreciated receiving the benefit of your thinking. I would be eager also to hear your observations following your possible trip to Vietnam next month, and hope you will be in touch next time you are near Washington.

Warm regards,



Henry A. Kissinger

Sir Robert Thompson
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HAK:TL:feg:9/15/69

Pitcott House, Winsford, Nr. Minehead, Somerset.

10 September 1969.

Dear Henry,

I was very sorry not to have had an opportunity of seeing you during my short visit to the States last month, mainly for the purpose of launching my last book ("No Exit from Vietnam"), though I was also able to give some lectures to staff colleges. I hope that you have returned to Washington refreshed from your vacation on the West Coast and fit for the difficult period which must now be facing you.

I must say that I am appalled at the general sense of illusion which is infecting the leader writers and columnists both here and in the States with regard to post-Vietnam policies. They seem to be working on the premise that the United States can end the war and withdraw, and that the situation will then be as if the war had never been fought at all. In my view, it is still a win or lose situation in Vietnam with Hanoi having no intention of negotiating except to obtain concessions which pre-determine victory.

If, because of domestic pressure, you are compelled to give way, and even assuming that this led to a comparatively smooth withdrawal and not, because of a chaotic collapse within South Vietnam, to a hazardous extrication operation, I find it very hard to believe that your chances of conducting constructive post-Vietnam policies, either at home or abroad, would be very high. On the domestic front, the Left would be jubilant and more rather than less demanding in all other fields. There would tend to be an over-reaction on the Right and considerable recrimination. This would inevitably lead to greater division within your country which I find a frightening prospect. Moreover, I think that defence costs would be inclined to soar so that, in the end, less funds would be available for domestic programs and there would be less determination to carry them out.

Abroad, I think that there would soon be considerable anxiety in Europe with regard to American intentions. For example, there would be uncertainty as to whether the American people would be prepared to stand over, say, West Berlin if pressure was applied by Russia (which I do not anticipate). In the third world, and particularly in South East Asia, there cannot fail to be great anxiety and I fear that some dominoes would begin to totter.

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I am in full agreement with the President's general policy of providing in future only limited support and encouraging a do-it-yourself attitude both in development and defence, but I do not think that this will be effective unless it is proved successful first in South Vietnam. Only that will give it credibility.

This policy is in fact another way of expressing what I have advocated in South Vietnam all along with the aim of re-establishing it as an independent non-communist state capable of standing on its own feet with only limited support. The tragedy is that, after the confusion of the last few years, this goal now seems attainable. All my information suggests that the situation has improved with a better performance on the part of the South Vietnamese and a reduced capacity on the part of Hanoi and particularly of the Vietcong. It is only necessary to look back to March, 1968, when Westy was asking for 200,000 more troops and Admiral Sharpe was planning (as he outlined to me) a heavy spring bombing campaign as the weather improved. Neither happened and subsequently you have been able to withdraw a whole combat division and yet the situation has not fallen apart.

I am sure that what I have called a long-haul low-cost strategy is the answer, not only in South Vietnam. Russia wants neither escalation nor confrontation which only tend to alert and unite the West and restore American popularity. We seem to me to be entering a period of controlled low level conflict with no great alarms - indeed, even negotiation on some subjects not relevant to such a form of conflict - which is designed to confuse the West, discourage involvement and isolate the United States. This certainly seems to be the pattern in Asia and Africa where, unless we are prepared to adopt a consistent long-haul low-cost strategy to meet it, there will be steady erosion.

I am sorry to have given you such a discourse when you are so busy. You may or may not agree with it, but I have developed this view as a result of a short book I am just finishing on "Revolutionary War in World Strategy, 1945-1969".

I am also writing today to Bill Sullivan, whom I saw in Washington last month, to say that I would be free about the middle of next month to visit Vietnam again if that would be helpful to you, both from the point of view of discussing and assessing the pacification program and also perhaps of giving you an independent, and I would hope objective, view of the situation. If, as I believe, the situation has improved and a satisfactory solution can be obtained, I would be happy to go on the record by saying so, including an article in Foreign Affairs in April next year which Ham Armstrong has tentatively suggested, but I could not do this without visiting Vietnam first.

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I am looking forward to seeing you again in any case
on my next visit. Meanwhile all best wishes,

Yours ever,

Bob Thompson